



## **NORTHEAST INDIA: GATEWAY TO SOUTHEAST ASIA UNDER ACT EAST POLICY**

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### **Abstract**

*Due to long standing political instability and geographical challenges in the region, adequate infrastructure development has not been able to meet the modern industrial needs. Limited development and lack of strong supply chain, operation of industries in this sector has become very costly. Political instability and lack of necessary resources (means of transport, energy, etc.), there has been a severe shortage of private sector investment in the northeastern states.*

*Lack of timely implementation of projects announced by the government is one of the major obstacles to the development of this sector. Significantly, North-East Vision-2020 was released in the year 2005, with special emphasis on highlighting the shortcomings and challenges of the region. At the same time, under this initiative, emphasis was laid on identifying such potential areas of development in the Northeast, with special focus on bringing the Northeastern states to the national average growth rate. But even now, there is a big gap in the economic growth rate of the northeastern states and other major states of the country. Present government has set up a special ministry for the development of North East region. In this research article efforts has been made to analysis importance of North East policy in the context of political, economical and strategic point of view.*

**Keyword: Northeastern, Look East Policy, South Asia, NHIDCL**

The NorthEastern part of India, which is rich in natural and mineral resources, has a more natural beauty than Kashmir, constantly neglected since independence, is politically insignificant but equally sensitive in terms of security. Sikkim is a very important region considering the whole of South Asia. Politically, this part joined India after independence. The North-East Council was established in 1971 for the periodic development of seven states (excluding Sikkim). The North-Eastern Development Financial Corporation was then established on August 8, 1995. In 2001, the Vajpayee government set up a special ministry for the overall development of the Northeast. This part, which is plagued by terrorism, ethnic conflict and infiltration and is crucial for Indian security, has come under increasing scrutiny due to the Government of India's 'Look East Policy'. The importance of the region in terms of geography, economy and security forced the political elites to reconsider.

### **The legacy of internal conflict and the question of security**

The legacy of the ethnic conflict in the Northeastern states is the legacy of British India. Northeast India is known as the most sensitive part of the whole of South Asia. The internal conflict between the tribes, the conflict against the tribes and the struggle against the rule of the tribes can be seen in the North East. The entire northeastern part is plagued by this conflict. A large number of terrorist groups are operating in the area, creating distinct identities and styles based on ethnic conflict. These include the Naga rebels in Nagaland, the ULFA movement in Assam and the National Democratic Front of Bodo Leaks, the People's Liberation Army in Manipur, the National Liberation Front of Tripura in Tripura and others. The anti-India movement exists on a large scale in this area. The internal conflict in the Northeast is as much an obstacle to Indian unity as it is an external concern. Most of the separatist and terrorist movements in the Northeast are active against India and are orchestrated by neighboring



countries. Cultural and geographical proximity on both sides is an obstacle to solving the problem of terrorism. Border relations between Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Pakistan are exacerbating the problem due to lack of effective mechanisms and communication.

The other side of the problem is more frightening. Indo-China border disputes have persisted since the 1962 Chinese invasion. About 36000 sq.m. of Arunachal Pradesh. China is claiming the territory. The economic development of the region has come to a standstill due to border disputes. The Kashmir border dispute is having an impact on Northeast India. Pakistan is taking advantage of this and building jihadi organizations in the northeast through Bangladesh and Nepal. Border disputes between Bangladesh and Nepal, security issues arising out of it, illegal infiltration and relocation of people, outbreaks of diseases like HIV and AIDS, drug trafficking etc. The reasons are creating difficulties in creating a constructive environment. Therefore, the conflict in Northeast India is creating both internal and external challenges for India.

### **Strategic Importance**

Northeast India is the plunder of natural resources by nature. Planned development of this region, which has a rich climate for biodiversity, potential thermal power generation, abundant oil and gas reserves, coal, mineral resources, forest resources, various crops, fruits, vegetables, will make Northeast India known to the world as India's potential export hub. . Northeast is economically prosperous with 38% of India's total thermal power generation capacity, approximately 190 billion km of gas reserves, 909 million tonnes of coal reserves, 49,000 MW of thermal power capacity, 513 million tonnes of oil reserves and 25% of India's total forest area.

In the age of globalization, Northeast India can be an important economic hub. India's future energy sources, land for various crops, huge reserves of scarce minerals, pharmaceutical projects, potential agricultural export areas, areas to be developed as green tourist destinations, important locations in South-West China and Southeast Asia, attracting foreign and domestic investors. India's potential market for the future. For this reason, the territory of Northeast India is important.<sup>1</sup>

Geographically, Northeast India is very important in terms of increasing India's influence in the South Asian region. Considering the geography of all the eight states, the states together account for 7.9 per cent of the total geographical area of India and 3.8 per cent of the total population. The poorest, underdeveloped and separatist region in South Asia is lagging behind due to lack of basic amenities in the domestic and international markets.

Northeast India's position is also important in the international context as it is surrounded by five Asian countries - China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The following tables show the importance of this area.



**Table No. 01: Boundaries of the Northeastern States**

Countries attached with the boundaries of the Northeastern States	Northeastern states boundaries attached with the neighbour states	Boundaries length (in km) between states and countries.
Myanmar	Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland	1643 km
Bangladesh	Asam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram	1880 km
Bhutan	Arunachal Pradesh, Asam and Sikkim	468 km
China	Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim	1325 km

The table above proves that Northeast India is strategically important and sensitive in establishing future relations with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and China as well as in expanding its influence in South Asia.

The significance of North East states as far strategic concern this is the only regions in the subcontinent which share a boundary with the five other countries-China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan. North East state share only 22 km long territory that connects it with the rest of India, which is called Chicken Neck Corridor. If this part comes under the control of a foreign country then the whole North East will be cut off from India.

#### **Northeast India, a victim of political apathy**

Considering the states of the Indian Union and their representation in Parliament, politically the influence of the States in the Northeast is very small. If political convenience is the criterion, the reason for not paying special attention to this area is obvious. The following is a list of Indian states represented in Parliament.

**Table No. 02 Representation of Northeastern States in the Parliament**

S.R.	States	Representation in Loksabha	S.R.	States	Representation in Loksabha
01	Uttarpradesh	80	01	Himachal Pradesh	04
02	Maharashtra	48	02	Haryana	10
03	Madhyapradesh	29	03	Manipur	<b>02</b>
04	Karnataka	28	04	Nagaland	<b>01</b>
05	Rajasthan	25	05	Mizoram	<b>01</b>
06	Kerala	20	06	Goa	02
07	West Bengal	42	07	Chattisgarh	11
08	Bihar	40	08	Jharkhand	14
09	Andhrapradesh	42	09	Asam	<b>14</b>
10	Tamilnadu	39	10	Jammu & Kashmir (Now	06



				Amended)	
11	Gujrat	26	11	Tripura	02
12	Odisha	21	12	Panjab	13
			13	Meghalaya	02
			14	Sikkim	01
			15	Arunachal Pradesh	02
			16	Uttaranchal	05
			17	Delhi	07
			18	One respresentation each: Chandigarh, Andaman, Lakshadwip, Panduchery, Dadra Nagar Haveli, Div & Daman	06
<b>12</b> <b>Stasses</b>	<b>Total</b> <b>Representation</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>23</b> <b>States</b>	<b>Total</b> <b>Representation</b>	<b>103</b>

*Source: Data collected from Loksabha site.*

According to the above table, there are 12 largest states in India with 440 representations in Parliament. This means that these states occupy 80 per cent of the parliament. This compares with 23 states but only 103 representations. In terms of representation of the northeastern states in Parliament, only 25 of the eight states are represented in Parliament i.e. 4.5 percent. The political significance of the northeastern states on the surface of Indian politics can be easily gauged from this. This area, which has gained a very important place, has been neglected for the last 60 years on the pretext that it is not only politically important. Constant ethnic conflict, backwardness, terrorist activities, neglect of Delhi etc. For some reason, Northeast India became a center of discontent. The attitude of the state and the center towards the conflict made the problem worse. The law and order situation became more problematic due to the central government's indifference to important issues and the policies control over every issue with such a limited mindset. The result was a tendency to solve questions and problems according to one's strengths and abilities, and a sense of isolation prevailed. A parallel government was formed to solve problems and issues in their own way. From that, new extremist organizations and institutions were formed. The denial of the Centre's *Sapatna* treatment and the sense of isolation inadvertently instilled in the minds of the people that the state was not an integral part of India. In an effort to create a distinct identity, the demand for an independent territory began to grow. The separatist movement and the demand for autonomy as well as the recognition of an independent existence mentally created a sense in the region that we were separate from India. The feeling that the rulers are reluctant to pay attention to their part of Jammu and Kashmir at a time when efforts are being made for economic development in other parts of the country is bound to make the region different.<sup>2</sup>

Persistent neglect has led to a proliferation of separatist organizations in the region. As a result, the governments of the northeastern states have to face many difficulties in dealing with this problem. The



issues became more serious as political parties politicized many sensitive issues. This does not rule out the possibility that Northeast India could be a major threat to national security in the future due to separatist and political affiliations, political patronage of movements, apathy of major national parties towards the region, economic backwardness and lack of planned development.

### **Importance of Northeast India: In the context of Southeast Asia**

India announced its Look East Policy on Southeast Asia in 2005. It is imperative for India to engage Northeast India with this policy in order to forge a new model of relations in the region. Northeast India is strategically important when it comes to China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Pakistan. Indo-Myanmar relations have not improved much due to the military rule in Myanmar. But given the national interest and the overall developments in South Asia, it is not in India's interest to ignore the country too much. It is not justifiable to take a different stance on Myanmar when it comes to Pakistan's Musharraf regime. China's growing interference and expansion in Myanmar is dangerous for India. Therefore, it is in the national interest for India to formulate a positive policy on Myanmar.

The main objective of India's Look East policy is to curb China's growing economic influence in the Asia-Pacific region, with Myanmar being a key factor. At the same time, the empowerment of the Northeast is essential for India to establish a positive relationship with China and to create an effective environment to prevent future power struggles. Building a network of roads in the northeastern states and the creation of efficient communication systems are essential for the better future of the region. Geographically, it is close to the border of Myanmar and Northeast India. Therefore, Northeast India-Myanmar equation with Southeast and East Asia is useful. The Government of India has taken some decisions in this regard regarding roads, railways, and transport and communication systems. But that is not all. Its speedy implementation is essential. The package announced by the Prime Minister of India is welcome. The many gorges connecting the states around the Himalayas as well as the road-railways came to be seen as potential links of imports and exports worth crores of rupees. The Prime Minister announced the construction of a modern airport at the capital Itanagar and the conversion of temporary air bases at Teju, Pasighat, Daporizo and Alag to the national air map. The construction of Tezu Airport is nearing completion and will be operational within the current financial year. The Pakyong Airport in Sikkim was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on September 24, 2020. Situated around 30 kilometres from Gangtok, the airport is built over an area of over 200 acres, atop a hill at 4,500 feet above sea level making it one of the five highest airports in the country.<sup>3</sup> This will help change the face of not only Arunachal but the whole of Northeast India. Similarly, the 'Trans Arunachal Highway Project' is a 5500 crore and 1,840 km stretch from Tawang to connect most of the major villages in Arunachal Pradesh. This lengthy project will help put Northeast India on the world map of transportation and trade. The 'Asian Highway' project to build a network of roads that can be transported from Singapore to Europe is being implemented in South-Southeast Asia at the initiative of the United Nations. Efforts are also being made to revive the road to China and West Asia. Against this backdrop, it has become imperative to build better roads in Northeast India, which lags behind in terms of transportation. The NEC has set its focus on building roads spanning 10,500 kilometres, which will include inter-state and roads of economic importance. A new scheme called the North East Road Sector Development Scheme, has been launched that will drive strategic projects for roads and bridges. These projects include Doimukh-Harmuti; Tura-Mankachar and Wokha-Merapani-Golaghat of 85 kilometres and will be led by the National Highway and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL), at an estimated cost of Rs 213.97 crores. A total of 14 such projects will be undertaken by the NHIDCL.<sup>4</sup>



Along with trade diplomacy, Northeast India also needs to make use of its historical and mixed culture in its relations with Southeast Asia. This factor has always been overlooked in Indian foreign policy to this day. But given the cultural similarities on both sides, India needs to take advantage of this in order to boost its economy and trade. At the same time, in order to end the long-running border dispute, it is necessary to create a mechanism to resolve the permanent border dispute through negotiations with the respective countries.

Trade is important to establish free and fair trade and international free trade between India and Southeast Asian countries with a view to creating a regional equal market in the context of globalization and a regional economic and trade cooperation in relation to free trade. The expected picture of Northeast India's potential market and economic growth is crucial in this context.

### **Conclusions**

The structure of Indian power is more based on the politics of votes than on finance. With the exception of Northeast India, other parts of the country (West, North, and South) have become more economically viable. The northeastern part is struggling to establish its own identity in its own country as it has not adopted any sustainable development strategy. Therefore, it can help in planning and implementation of holistic development and creating importance in finance. In this, not only the government but also the participation of the local people is important. It is the duty of the people and the government to co-operate and take advantage of the work of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the northeastern state rather than expressing displeasure as we do not have the country's attention. Organizations like Sir Ratan Tata Trust have been conducting water studies in collaboration with the International Water Management Organization for the last 5-6 years. Efforts are being made to implement concrete schemes directly related to the livelihood of the people.<sup>5</sup>

Northeast India is an important factor in the determination of Indian foreign policy. Four of the six neighboring nations share a long border with the region. In the context of direct maritime access and an important point in Southeast Asia relations, Indian strategists need to pay more attention to the development of national interests and territories.

After so many years of apathy, Indian policy makers are paying close attention to the geological significance of this region as well as the gateway to Southeast Asia. Northeast India could be a region of coordination between Southeast Asia, China and India. Northeast India can play an important role in bringing India and Southeast Asian countries closer together.

Lack of visionary leadership is a curse in Northeast India. Most of the political leadership here is fed up with corruption and crime. The political leadership is rife with sectarian and criminal activities, violations of the rule of law and misconduct. Not only doesn't that, all political parties have any vision for future development other than just popular declarations. As a result, the development of the region was hampered. Therefore, effective and positive leadership is the need of the hour. For this, it is necessary to make the special ministry and northeastern council of the central government in northeast India more capable. The present government in the centre has set up a new ministry for the development of the region under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region. Time bound completion of projects leads towards the confidence of northeast people on Indian Constitution as well as Indian Government.



If India wants to make an impact in Southeast Asia, the neglected part of the Northeast will be in danger. Commitment to balanced development and growth of the region is essential in terms of foreign policy, strategy and internal development. At the political and economic level, Northeast India needs to be integrated with Southeast Asia to create a new Asia. This is not an option but a need of the hour.